

Archaeology in Oxford

Oxford City report to the Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum

National Planning Policy Framework related field work between February and June 2025

Staircase 7, Tom Quad, Christ Church

Between March 2024 and February 2025 Keevill Heritage Ltd carried out a programme of archaeological building recording during renovation work at Staircase 7 in Tom Quad, Christ Church. The building record mainly dealt with 19th-and/or earlier 20th-century stud partitions, but some earlier 17th century features were also exposed. Digital photographs, photogrammetric models and detailed drawings were taken of significant exposed fabric. A watching brief was also undertaken during alterations to the modern ground-floor male WCs, a lift pit, and the excavations needed for the external ramped access. Only later post-medieval and modern stratigraphy was exposed, although a few sherds of medieval pottery were recovered.



Above: The first floor of Tom Quad Staircase 7 looking north from the top of the staircase with the door in the background. Note the stepped runout chamfer-stop towards the base of the staircase corner-post.

Nos 10-15 High Street, All Soul's College

In February further test pit excavation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology within the basements of Nos 13-14 High Street in advance of a redevelopment scheme for All Soul's College involving the adaptation of former shops for college use. The test pits have helped to further develop a deposit model for the site, with a number of partially truncated Late Saxon cellar pits under Nos 11-12 (these were subject to previous test pit investigations) and a zone of Late Saxon pits, post holes and surfaces under Nos 13-14. The test pit information will be used to develop a recording strategy for main development impacts.

University Sports Track, Iffley Road

In March an archaeological evaluation was undertaken at the Oxford University running track by Thames Valley Archaeological Services. Six trenches were excavated across the site which is terraced downwards to the east towards Iffley Road. All of the trenches revealed layers of thick redeposited

Oxford clay, and no significant archaeological horizons were identified. The work was required because previous investigations on the adjacent swimming pool site recorded features associated with late Saxon pottery.

Watlington Road Substation

In April a watching brief was undertaken by Dalcour Maclaren during groundworks at the Watlington Road Substation. No significant archaeological remains were recorded. The report is forthcoming. The work was required because of the proximity of recorded Roman archaeology.

No 12 Turl Street

Between May and June historic building recording and a watching brief was undertaken by Border Archaeology at No 12 Turl Street. The renovation works involved shallow floor excavation impacting a suspended floor containing reused older timbers and possible buried flagstones. Other minor works to the frontage structure, which is listed as 17th century but may contain medieval fabric, and later outbuildings were also programmed. The report is forthcoming.

Christ Church Deanery

Between May and June Graham Keevil, the Cathedral Archaeologist, has been undertaking historic building recording during conversion works to the Grade I listed Deanery to partition the extensive residence. The work has revealed further evidence of Tudor fabric relating to the establishment of Cardinal College by Cardinal Wolsey in a part of the east range of Tom Quad that had been previously assumed to be 17th century in date. The works further exposed parts of a northern tower with key stones likely associated with an internal stair, also chamfered door posts, encased moulded beams in ceiling voids and a lovely lattice (leaded light) window forming a gallery over the Dean's kitchen.



Above: Cathedral Archaeologist Graham Keevil inspecting newly revealed Tudor windows in the Deanery.

Hertford College, Main Quadrangle

Between February and June intermittent excavation work has been undertaken by Oxford Archaeology at Hertford College prior to the building of a new basement under main Quad and the 18th century chapel to house parts of the college library and archive. The excavation has revealed further well-built walls defining a medieval tenement or tenements that fronted onto Catte Street. Rubbish pits associated with these tenements, containing pottery and animal bone, have been excavated with finds including a reading stone, used as a lens for close book work (See image below).

The properties along Catte Street were associated with a community of manufacturers (strap making, binding, stacioners, illuminators etc) associated with book production, possibly from the late 12th century but certainly from the early 13th century. At this time Oxford was one of a handful of urban centres that had such communities along with London, Cambridge Bologna and Paris. Although in the 13th century other towns like Lincoln, Norwich, Wincher and York also attracted artisans involved in book production. The excavation is ongoing.



Above: Librarians from the Bodleian visit a site of medieval book production at Hertford College.



Above: The reading stone or lens from Hertford College (reading stones were gradually replaced by glasses from the 13th century).



Above: Walls defining a tenement fronting onto Catte Street (located further to the right), associated with medieval book production.

The Eagle and Child, No 49 St Giles

In March Oxford Archaeology undertook a watching brief to the rear of the Eagle and Child pub during the excavation of test pits to establish the character of the root base of an adjacent yew tree. The work followed on from various earlier phases of investigation which encountered evidence of activity to the rear of properties from the 13th to possibly as late as the 17th century. This included some structural remains predating the existing buildings, and evidence for 17th-19th century garden activity pre-dating the construction of the existing pub building fronting St Giles in 1843-1849. The majority of the deposits encountered were soils associated with 17th-18th century garden activity. A single wall footing possibly represented an internal partition pre-dating the existing configuration of Number 49.

The pottery report highlighted the interest of at least six conical, wheel-thrown, flowerpots dated to c1740-1800, made from local type of post-medieval red earthenware known as Brill post-medieval slipware. Like the medieval Brill wares this was manufactured in the village of Brill in west Buckinghamshire. A characteristic of Brill flowerpots is the presence of a decorative band of white slip paint around the rim (usually a beaded rim) and sometimes other horizontal bands of white slip on the body. Pottery specialist John Cotter notes that "*The level of craftsmanship and detailing found on such early flowerpots marks them out from the mass-produced plain (PMR) vessels produced at Brill (and over much of the country) in the Victorian and later periods.*".

The Eagle and Child pub and adjacent Greens Café (Nos 49-51 St Giles) have in recent years been subject to detailed building assessment including wallpaper study, paint study and dendrochronological survey. A recent dendrochronological study by the Oxford Research Laboratory identified the oldest sampled timber from within the former Green's Café building as 16th century in date.

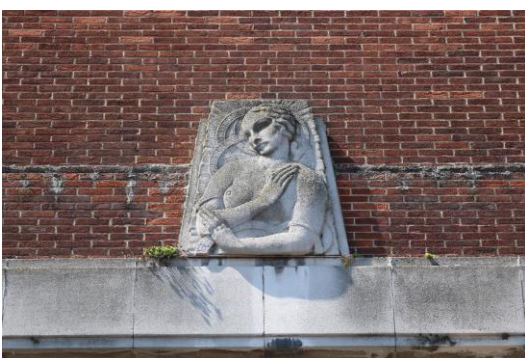
Not previously reported

Speedwell House, Speedwell Street

In January a watching brief was carried out on the site by Museum of London Archaeology close to Speedwell House. Three trial pits and two boreholes were excavated. One test pit encountered a stone limestone floor covering a dumped layer of silty clay and animal bones of assumed post-medieval date with silty clay natural alluvium at 1.40m below ground level.

The Odeon Cinema, George Street

In January historic building recording was undertaken by Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd at the former Odeon cinema on George Street. The cinema, previously known as The Ritz, was originally built between 1935-1936. It was designed for Union Cinemas by Robert Cromie, a well-established architect of theatres and cinemas. It was built in a functional Art Deco style, with a stone architrave and figure relief on the eastern side by the sculptor Newbury Trent. It originally comprised a single auditorium, but after a devastating fire in 1963, much of the interior was gutted and subsequently redesigned the same year. By 1975 the cinema had been remodelled to accommodate three screens and by the 2000s it had been remodelled again by the Odeon to provide six cinema screens.



Above: The Newbury Abbot Trent bass relief, on the top facade of the Odeon cinema, George Street.

The recording noted the location of the originally moulded jambs and a simple frieze detail on the first-floor lobby to Screens 1, 2, and 3, which originally formed a niche within the circle foyer, the projectionist's quarters on the fourth floor which retained much of its original layout and some features, including décor, and a possible film storage room.

Headland Archaeology also carried out an archaeological watching brief during the excavation of two trial pits within the building. No significant archaeology was observed.

Other news

Pusey Street Excavation, St John's College

In May the City Council Archaeologist met local residents from St John Street to convey the initial results of the now concluded archaeological excavation at Pusey Lane. The excavation was undertaken by Oxford Archaeology and recorded a number of significant features of likely prehistoric date (the scientific dates are awaited). It also recorded a deep feature containing medieval finds, potentially from the later years of occupation of the King's Houses (the Royal Beaumont Palace) established here by Henry I in c1130 or the initial (14th century) occupation of the site by the Carmelite Friars.



Above: Local residents visiting the Pusey Lane site.

Oxpast

The City Council Archaeologists gave a talk on 'Recent Archaeological discoveries in Oxford' at the Oxfordshire's Past event in Faringdon in June.

David Radford
Archaeologist, Oxford City Council